

Special Focus: Bad Buddhism

Connecting with and Distancing from: Transnational Influences in the Formation of Buddhist Identity and Practice in Bangladesh

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This article illustrates how conversations on “good” and “bad” forms of Buddhism have taken place in Bangladesh since the 19th-century Theravāda reformation. First, in the process of purging prior Hindu and Tantric influences, second, with the introduction of Mahāyāna Buddhism through Risshō-Kōsei-kai; and, third, in responding to recent Buddhist extremism in Myanmar. The article also shows how “bad Buddhism”—for instance, Buddhist extremism in Myanmar—impacts Buddhists in other countries. For Bangladeshi Buddhists, claiming their identity and practices involves a process of both connecting with the “good” and distancing from the “bad.”

Keywords: Bangladesh; Rissho-Kōshei Kai; Rohingya; global religion

The Buddhist community forms a very small minority in Bangladesh, only approximately one percent of the total population of 160 million. Bangladeshi Buddhists mainly have been following Theravāda Buddhism, after a reformation initiated by the Arakanese Buddhist monk Sāramedha Mahāthera and Buddhist priests of Chittagong, when Bangladesh was still a region of British India (Chakma 2011; Khan 2003; Chaudhuri 1982). Since the reformation movement began in 1856, the culture and practices of Bangladeshi Buddhists have been reshaped by many transnational influences.

I argue in this paper that transnational connections have played a significant role in the formation of Bangladeshi Buddhist identity and practices, in the way they came to define “good” and “bad” forms of Buddhism. Bangladeshi Buddhists’ connections with Buddhists of other countries required them to be receptive to cultures and texts from outside which were then fused into the existing literary, geographical, economic, and political conditions of Bangladesh. While Bangladeshi Buddhists have successfully welded foreign cultural and literary elements into their own practices to fulfill their religious needs, some recent manifestations of their transnational connections pose potential challenges to the uniformity of their Theravāda culture. In this paper, I first sketch the nature of Bangladeshi Buddhists’ transnational connections as they began in the nineteenth century.

This is followed by a reflection on how new forms of Buddhism, especially Japanese Risshō-Kōsei-kai, have penetrated into Bangladesh. Finally, I illustrate how the increase of religious extremism and communalism—specifically the harassment of Muslims in Buddhist countries—endangers Bangladeshi Buddhists and impairs their expressing their transnational connections.

In the vast scholarship on Buddhism in Asia, very little research has been devoted to Bangladesh. Most written documents by Bangladeshi writers are narratives passed down from oral tradition (Chakma 2011; Chaudhuri 1982). These native writers claim that the Buddha himself and his immediate disciples spread Buddhism in ancient Bengal (Chaudhuri 1982, Niyogi 1980). The historical validity of such claims is uncertain, as it is impossible to verify the exact period when Buddhism was introduced to Bengal. Regarding this narrative, Paola Tinti, in her PhD dissertation, argues

Despite some attempts to present Bangladeshi Buddhism as the continuation of an Indian tradition supposedly going back to the times of Buddha, its links with the Southeast Asian tradition are predominant and the efforts to deny them are part of a Bangladeshi nationalistic plan (Tinti 1998: 2).

Tracing Bangladeshi Buddhism to an Indian root is the strategy generally adopted by Bangladeshi writers as well as early Western scholars (e.g., Bechert 1970). Tinti, by contrast, attempts “to reconcile the Indian and Burmese roots of Bangladeshi Buddhism” (1998: 2). In doing so, Tinti takes an important step in recognizing and highlighting the transnational character of Buddhism in Bangladesh. I propose that, while foregrounding their Indian roots, Bangladeshi Buddhists do not completely reject influences from Myanmar and elsewhere. In what follows, I emphasize that the roots of Bangladeshi Buddhism go beyond just Myanmar and India. Tracing the various transnational influences helps us understand Bangladeshi Buddhism more deeply, especially in terms of the strategies resorted to by a minority community for their survival and for creating their identity.

Initial Reformations of “Bad” Buddhism

Transnational influences in the formation of contemporary Bangladeshi Buddhist culture began as a monastic reform project led by Sāramedha that expanded to other aspects of religious practice and literary exchange. Beginning in the mid-19th century, what was “bad” in Bangladeshi Buddhism was a monastic ordination system maintained by a group of priests, known as *rāoli purohit*, that did not accord with the Theravāda Vinaya that prescribes the appropriate age for higher ordination (*upasampadā*) as at least twenty years (Chakma 2011; Chaudhuri 1974, 1982; Khan 2003). The impetus for the reformation of Bangladeshi Buddhist practices initially arose from the idea of purifying the monastic order by following the Theravāda Vinaya. The reverential perception of Myanmar as an “ideal Buddhist country” (*paṭirūpa-desa*) was effective in making Sāramedha’s reforms successful, establishing his sangha, the Saṅgharājanikāya, as the foremost monastic faction in Bangladesh. Although a majority of Bangladeshi monks were re-ordained, Sāramedha’s reformation did not go completely uncontested. The Mahasthabīrnikāya opposed the reformation and continued to follow their old ordination lineage, although they eventually altered their robes to match Theravāda ones (Khan 2003; Tinti 1998: 84). In addition, it is important to recognize that, after the Sāramedha-led

reforms, not all of Bangladeshi Buddhists followed Theravāda practice. Some retained Tantric and Hindu-oriented ritual forms (Rosén-Hockersmith 1985: 160; D. K. Barua 1998).

These ordination reforms were directly followed by reforms of ritual, literature, education, and monastic architecture, as well as exchanges of cultural objects such as relics, images, and statues of the Buddha. The process of purifying the ordination system expanded into purifying the Buddhist culture, with an aim to eradicate all non-Buddhist elements. Consequently, debates regarding what are proper and improper forms of Buddhist practice, what elements of culture must be abandoned, and what should be adopted continue, even today.

As a result of the reformation, Bangladeshi scholars and monks began to travel to Buddhist countries such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand to learn Pāli and study Buddhist texts. Monastic education centers, especially the *pariveṇas* in Sri Lanka became preferred destinations for Bangladeshi Buddhist scholars and monks for studying Theravāda Buddhism (S. Barua 2001). In addition to translating texts and composing manuals of ethical practice and daily worship, Buddhist scholars in Bengal also used indigenous devotional ballad songs, such as *kīrtans* and *pālā-gān*, to popularize Buddhist stories (Mahathera and Mahathera 2000; Tinti 2012). The introduction of new texts was not purely in imitation of foreign literary forms, rather, the songs' contents were infused with existing Bengali literary forms and the ballad culture of Bangladesh.

Literary and educational connections were followed by exchanges of relics. As early as 1931, a Tibetan monk visited Chittagong and shared the hair relic of a sacred Buddhist figure (D. Bhikkhu 2011; Daily News 2007). This relic was installed in the Nandan Kanan Buddhist Monastery in Chittagong. In 1960, 2007 and 2012, Bangladeshi Buddhist leaders shared portions of the hair relic with Sri Lanka (D. Barua 2018). Assisted by diplomats of the two countries, a portion of the hair relic was successfully installed in Gangārāmaya, a Buddhist monastery in Colombo (Jayawardhana 2007; Gangārāmaya 2012; D. Barua 2018:32). Thus, Bangladesh does not stand only at the receiving end of cultural objects from other countries, but, through this exchange of the hair relic, has also participated in the transmission of cultural objects to majority Buddhist countries. This exchange of relics was also supported by (officially Muslim) Bangladeshi governments to strengthen diplomatic connections.

One of the most visible outcomes of the reformation has been substituting non-Buddhist ritual practices by Theravāda oriented rituals. For example, offerings (*pūjās*) to gods and goddesses such as Ganeśa, Kārtikeyya, Lakṣmī, and Magadheśvarī, revered by Buddhists and Hindus alike, were discouraged by Buddhist monks at the beginning of the reformation. These practices have rapidly lost significance among Bangladeshi Buddhists, although many still perform these on a smaller scale. This process of abandoning Hindu influence and purifying Buddhist culture started in the latter part of the 19th century and continues today.

Prior to the reformation, Bangladeshi Buddhists had followed practices that were relatively inclusive of what might be considered non-Buddhist elements, such as the worship of Hindu religious figures, as mentioned. The reformation encouraged Buddhists to purge themselves of these “inefficacious practices” (Sthabir 1932; B. M. Barua 2013) in favor of prayers and offerings oriented to Buddhist saintly persons. Benimadhab Barua, a renowned Bengali Indologist, writing in 1913,

documented, in his words, “fourfold substitutions” used by Buddhist reformers to purify Theravāda Buddhist culture: 1) worshipping Buddha instead of ancestral deities, 2) associating with Theravāda Buddhist monks, instead of previous *rāoli* priests, 3) performing Buddhist-oriented ceremonies, instead of previous rites and rituals, and 4) replacing existing non-Buddhist religious terminology and expressions by Buddhist terminology (B. M. Barua 2013: 22). These changes were encouraged by monks in their sermons and used as a way of upholding a distinct Buddhist identity, separate from the dominance of Hinduism. Texts also advocated the merits of abandoning the worship of non-Buddhist gods and goddesses and replacing these practices with the worship of exemplary Buddhist sacred figures, following practices in Theravāda countries. Bisuddhācār Sthabīr (1932), in a versified eulogy, encourages worshipping Buddhist monk Sīvalī as more efficacious for gaining prosperity than worshipping Lakṣmī, as Sīvalī, a chief disciple of the Buddha, was reputed to have never been deprived of alms (Taniyama 1998). Thus, the basic practice of ceremonial offerings to a higher being for gaining prosperity remained, only the religious figure changed, from the Hindu goddess Lakṣmī to the Buddhist arahant Sīvalī.

Ritual offerings to Upagupta were also inspired by similar practices in Myanmar (Mettabangsha Bhikkhu 2003; Strong 1992). Upagupta, known as a vanquisher of Māra, is generally invoked for averting natural disasters. Ritual offerings to Upagupta were popularized by Sādhana-nanda Mahāsthabīr, popularly known as Banabhante, after some devotees died in a storm while crossing a river. Following this incident, Banabhante instructed that, before commencing any religious functions, Upagupta must be invoked and offerings must be made to him, in order to prevent natural disasters (M. Bhikkhu 2003). As the magnitude of natural disasters in Bangladesh became greater, Upagupta invocations gained increasing popularity among Bangladeshi Buddhists. Thus, although Upagupta worship developed in imitation of Buddhists in Myanmar, Bangladeshi Buddhists appropriated this practice within their own particular cultural context.

Bangladeshi Buddhists’ transnational connections with traditional Buddhist countries were not limited to literary and cultural exchanges. These connections also played a crucial role during the Bangladeshi war of liberation from Pakistan in 1971. During this war, Jyotipala Mahathera, who later became the tenth sangharāja of Bangladesh, was sent by Bangladesh’s government-in-exile on a mission to Buddhist countries, in order to put international pressure on the Pakistani military (J. Mahathera 1974). Thus, maintaining a favorable relationship with Buddhist countries has been beneficial not only for seeking good models of religious practice but also for important diplomatic connections of the Bangladeshi government.

In recent decades, however, we see new developments in Bangladeshi Buddhism: the introduction of women’s ordination, influenced by Sri Lanka and Thailand, and the establishment of centers by Risshō-Kōsei-kai, a Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhist organization. Bangladeshi Buddhist connections to Theravāda countries have been documented to some extent in Bengali and English language publications (Chaudhuri 1982; Tinti 1998). Scholarly

attention has also been directed to the introduction of women's ordination to Bangladesh (Dipananda 2014; Tsomo 2006: 2014). However, I have not been able to find any scholarly publications on the establishment of Risshō-Kōsei-kai (henceforward, RKK) centers in Bangladesh. In the following section, I describe some of the main features of RKK, drawing attention to how its introduction rekindled debates on “good” and “bad” Buddhism in thinking about the future of Buddhism in Bangladesh.

Introduction of Risshō-Kōsei-kai into Bangladesh

RKK was founded by Niwano Nikkyō and Naganuma Myōkō in 1938. They were both originally members of another movement named Reiyūkai (Association of Friends of the Spirits), “a lay Buddhist association mainly based on ancestor commemoration and the Lotus Sūtra” (Dessi 2018: 162). Niwano and Naganuma branched off and started RKK as a separate organization, originally named *Dai Nippon Risshō Kōseikai* (Great Japan Society for Establishing Righteousness and Friendly Relations), “because they were dissatisfied by its methods of proselytising and the insufficient interest in the Lotus Sūtra at the headquarters” (Dessi 2018: 162). However, in its early years, RKK was not as centrally focused on the Lotus Sūtra but was “heavily focused on divination and healing practices based on the spiritual powers of Naganuma” (Dessi 2018: 162). After Naganuma's death, RKK's religious practices were formalized by Niwano.

In 1969, the RKK became more involved in social activities, establishing the Movement for Creating a Brighter Society (*Akarui shakai-zukuri undō*) which “provided the framework for a broad range of Risshō Kōseikai activities taking place at the community level” such as “social service (ranging from the collection of garbage to caring for the disabled), the organisation of symposia, festivals and other events, fund-raising and relief activities, and interreligious gatherings” (Dessi 2018: 164). Drawing on the Lotus Sūtra's emphasis on “one vehicle” (*ekayāna*), RKK interprets all religions as leading to the same goal. Thus, RKK is also active in organizing interreligious dialogues to promote peace and harmony among faith communities. The peace activities of RKK were further strengthened by the establishment of the Niwano Peace Foundation (*Niwano heiwa zaidan*) in 1978.

RKK started its branch in Bangladesh in the early 1990s. By 2014, RKK had established several centers in different parts of Bangladesh, with a central headquarter in Chittagong (RKK News Archive 2014). The precise nature of RKK's influence on Bangladeshi Buddhism requires more in-depth research. In what follows, I outline some of the features of RKK in Bangladesh, indicating their relationship to and differences with existing Theravāda culture.

The foremost feature of RKK in Bangladesh (and elsewhere) is that almost all the leaders and members are lay people. Generally, in Theravāda Buddhist societies, monks (and nuns wherever applicable) are at the top of the social hierarchy. In terms of religious practices and rituals, monks have the main authority and power. The introduction of RKK has opened up an option for lay people to have their own organizational structure separate from existing monasteries. RKK also uses texts, such as the Lotus Sūtra, that are not usually known to Theravāda monks. Although doctrinally there are disagreements between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, RKK members do not disregard

Theravāda monks altogether. In fact, whenever they inaugurate a new humanitarian project, they hold their first gatherings at a Theravāda monastery to help initiate social and philanthropic works in the area. In some religious functions, RKK members can be seen sitting next to Theravāda monks, although monks still occupy higher seats. In 2010, RKK invited some senior Bangladeshi Buddhist monks to their headquarters in Japan and reported on their website that they maintain a “cordial relationship” (RKK News Archive 2010). The senior monks also commended RKK for their peace and philanthropic activities.

The lay leadership of RKK has also made participation in secular activities both easier and more central than Theravāda monastic leadership has. Although RKK is motivated by a religious text and tradition, secular concerns are important to its agenda of social service. For instance, RKK members organize rallies celebrating International Mother Language Day on February 21. This day commemorates the martyrs, most of whom were students at Dhaka University, who were killed in a protest procession in 1952, demanding Bengali to be the state language, when Bangladesh was still East Pakistan. RKK members also campaign for the protection of human rights on various levels: for minority populations, women, children in the labor force, and so on. RKK is very active in organizing various programs for the economic development of Buddhists. One such program involves educating farmers in remote villages in better agricultural methods. RKK also attracts educated Buddhist youths, offering them various opportunities, such as the prospect of visiting Japan. In fact, such a prospect seems to be one of the major reasons behind the popularity and success of RKK in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a developing country where the young people face tremendous competition in getting a good education and finding jobs. Since RKK offers the possibility of visiting Japan, and prospects for other vocations, being an RKK member, seems to be a sensible option for aspiring middle class youths.

Another notable contribution of RKK in Bangladesh is its direct involvement in organizing conferences for reinvigorating inter-religious/inter-communal harmony. Bangladesh is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country where people of different religious and ethnic communities have lived together for centuries. Despite this, there have been major incidents of inter-communal violence. Minority religious or ethnic communities have often been the victims of such violence. In 2012, for example, twenty-two Buddhist monasteries, several Hindu temples, and many Buddhist and Hindu houses were attacked, looted, and burnt down by Muslim extremists (Sunandapriya 2013b). Following this incident (about which more will be said, below), RKK supported interfaith gatherings to promote better understanding and harmonious relationships between religious communities (Rissho Kosei-kai Youtube Channel 2013). Mitsuyuki Aritomi, who is the branch minister of RKK in Bangladesh, also met government and military personnel and had dialogues urging security for Buddhists. Indeed, organizing peace campaigns and conferences is a major focus of RKK’s activities. It is noteworthy that Japan, being a country with a rich and living Buddhist heritage, is an important donor nation to the Bangladesh government (Chowdhury 2008). Government officials, witnessing a Japanese organization like RKK advocating for Bangladeshi Buddhists, will take the safety of the Buddhist minority more seriously; at least, that is the expectation.

These activities help establish RKK's image as a humanitarian organization not limited to religious activities alone.

Still, RKK introduces texts, types of Buddha statues, and ritual practices that have not been previously known in the Theravāda tradition. In addition, RKK has financed a translation and publication of the Lotus Sūtra in Bengali, despite its not being read in Theravāda monasteries. Although RKK does not disregard Theravāda Buddhism, I argue that it is presenting a mode of religious practice and a form of activism that are gradually heading towards conflict with Theravāda tradition and monastic authority in Bangladesh. In a casual conversation on this topic, Bhikkhu Sunandapriya, the second abbot of International Buddhist Monastery in Dhaka, expressed to me disappointment with people who participated in both Theravāda and RKK ceremonies. He referred to them as having a character of duplicity (*di-carita*). He emphasized that Buddhism in Bangladesh has been primarily Theravāda in form and the introduction of RKK is therefore a disruption to this existing culture. He admitted, however, that RKK is financially stronger and, in their religious events, they provide donations (*dāna*) to Theravāda monks. Dharmamitra Mahathera, the abbot of the same monastery, also mentioned to me that the situation is not significantly conflictual as yet, although people do hold different views about RKK. He emphasized that discord may grow if RKK attempts to exert leadership or influence over Theravāda monks.

This situation poses a significant challenge for the future of Buddhism in Bangladesh. Based on my conversations with Bangladeshi Buddhists, they display three general attitudes toward RKK's influence in Bangladesh. First, there are those who become involved with RKK due to a dissatisfaction with Theravāda Buddhism or Buddhist monks, because these monks are generally limited to practicing traditional rituals and cannot offer the laity the same kind of economic assistance as RKK. Second, there are those who appreciate the diversity that RKK adds to Buddhist practices in Bangladesh, and laud RKK for the economic opportunities that it offers to the youth. I would characterize these admirers of RKK as having liberal attitudes: they participate in Theravāda religious practices and also appreciate RKK. Third, there are still others who consider the RKK a threat to Buddhism in Bangladesh. They claim that the Buddhist community in Bangladesh is very small and organizations like RKK not only introduce foreign rituals but also contribute toward dividing the community. RKK religious ceremonies, obviously diverge from traditional Theravāda ways of practice in the use of scarves with statements written in Japanese and in the chanting of Japanese versions of the non-Theravāda Heart Sūtra and Lotus Sūtra. The establishment of RKK centers in different parts of Bangladesh has already made it impossible to state that Bangladeshi Buddhism is homogeneously Theravāda. Thus, the roots of contemporary Bangladeshi Buddhism now expand beyond India and Myanmar.

The above paragraphs illustrate that Bangladeshi Buddhists have generally maintained a favorable relationship with traditional Buddhist countries and have great pride in the cultural, religious, monastic, and literary influences received from those countries. We have also seen how Mahāyāna influence is becoming more visible, particularly in the establishment of RKK in Bangladeshi Buddhist culture. Among Theravāda Buddhist countries, Bangladeshi Buddhists closely

identify with the culture of Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. However, the rise of Buddhist extremism, especially in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, has led Bangladeshi Buddhists to rethink their connections with these countries. Since 2012 there has been a rapid proliferation of extremist tendencies among some Buddhist nationalist groups in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Such extremist tendencies are generally portrayed in the international media as targeted against Muslim minorities. This has directly affected the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in Bangladesh.

I will now illustrate how the violence against Muslims, particularly “the Rohingya crisis” in Myanmar, has angered Bangladeshi Muslims, who in turn have expressed their vengeance on Bangladeshi Buddhists. In the absence of scholarly work on these most recent incidents surrounding the impact of this crisis on Bangladeshi Buddhists, I rely on reports and articles published in the national press and online news media. It is also important to remark that social media and blogs play a significant role in fueling communal sentiments. These often express religious intolerance, sometimes leading to actual violence. Thus, I also consider it methodologically significant to take social media seriously in the study of communal and religious intolerance.

Distancing from Violent Expressions of Buddhism

Of all the news of international refugees making headlines in the media in recent times, the escalation of what has come to be known as the “Rohingya crisis,” is perhaps the most tragic. The Rohingyas are a “confessional ethnic group” (Ibrahim 2016: 1), living in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, speaking a language identical to the Chittagongian dialect of Bangladesh. They are also referred to as a “stateless” people, as their citizenship is not recognized by Myanmar, since, historically, the ancestors of Rohingyas came from what is now Bangladesh (Ibrahim 2016). Due to their contested and controversial citizenship status, the Rohingyas have also been denied basic rights and subjected to political and military persecution. In an in-depth study on the Rohingyas, Ibrahim notes the “Rohingya refugee problem emerged out of a number of historical trajectories” (Ibrahim 2016: xiv). Ibrahim further remarks, “Ever since Burma (current Myanmar) became independent in 1948 they (Rohingyas) have been targeted whenever ambitious (or desperate) politicians need to deflect attention from other matters” (2016: 1).

Since Myanmar’s independence, while Burmese governments in power have “called for expulsion [of the Rohingyas] from their homeland” (Ibrahim 2016: 2), the main opposition parties have remained silent and apathetic to the suffering of the Rohingyas. This led *The Economist* to characterize the Rohingyas as the “most persecuted people on Earth” (*The Economist* 2015). The activities of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in their fight for the rights of Rohingya people, sometimes targeting Buddhist citizens, have only resulted in infuriating Buddhist extremists and the Myanmar government, justifying (or at least seeming to justify) the deployment of the army in that region (Head 2017). As a result, tensions that formerly were manifested in small scale violence have intensified into a virtual civil war (Ibrahim 2016). Corporate interests involving “evictions of smallholders to make room for massive land grabs” also seem to be involved in the displacement of the Rohingya population (Sassen 2017). All this has resulted in the mass migration of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh and other neighboring countries. This massive persecution and

displacement of the Rohingyas has come to be recognized in the international media as the Rohingya crisis.

This situation is worsened by the fact that Buddhist extremist nationalist parties claim the Rohingyas as potential threats to the survival of Buddhism in Myanmar (Ibrahim 2016). ARSA is also named as a terrorist group and alleged to have links with global Islamic terrorist organizations like ISIS (Naing 2017). Some nationalist groups, like Ma Ba Tha and 969, led by Buddhist monks in Myanmar, justify the military actions against Rohingyas as appropriate and necessary (Keane 2017). As a result, the Rohingya crisis—rooted in the complex historical, political, and economic context of Myanmar—has come to be portrayed in the print and electronic media as a religious conflict where Buddhists are persecuting Muslims (Peck 2017). Such a portrayal not only obscures the actual causes of the Rohingya crisis, but also results in enraging Bangladeshi Muslims who, in the name of showing solidarity with the Rohingyas, express their rage by threatening the Buddhist community of Bangladesh.

The Rohingya crisis has been an ongoing issue for many decades, but, since 2015, as conflicts started occurring more frequently, the influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh has also increased dramatically. News of major violent attacks against Rohingyas enrages Islamic extremist groups, who in turn spread anti-Buddhist speech that causes Bangladeshi Buddhists to be afraid of potential assaults (J Barua 2017; Hasan 2013). Bangladeshi Buddhists' fear of potential attacks and displacement is neither imaginary nor merely based on anti-Buddhist speech. Instead, it is rooted in the trauma of actual violent incidents that occurred in 2012, when Buddhist monasteries, Hindu temples, and hundreds of houses were destroyed by Muslims in different parts of Bangladesh. As the Buddhists in the Ramu Upazila sub-district were most affected, this incident became known as the "Ramu Tragedy" or "Ramu Violence" of 2012 (K Barua 2014; Sunandapriya 2013b). This attack was reported to have been triggered by a photo showing dishonor to the Qur'an, allegedly posted by a Buddhist man to his Facebook page. This story was subsequently proven to be fabricated, created more for political than religious reasons, in advance of the national election that had been scheduled to take place a few months after the Ramu incident (The Daily Star 2012). Ramu Upazila is also very close to a large concentration of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and many jobless young male Rohingya refugees were alleged to have been recruited in the Ramu violence (Ahmed 2012). The Bangladesh government promptly supported the reconstruction of many of the destroyed monasteries, but Buddhists in Ramu and other parts of Bangladesh continue to live this trauma and fear that worse things could happen to them if even a slight provocation of Islamic religious sentiment occurs. Thus, since 2012, leading Bangladeshi Buddhist leaders have organized demonstrations denouncing the violence and expressing their solidarity for the Rohingyas, as a minority community.

This situation has been aggravated by an extremely provocative but factually unfounded article published in a popular Bangladeshi newspaper *Daily Janakantha* (Manna 2017). In that article, titled "Meditation centers established to create new dissensions in the Hill Tracts region," Firoz Manna, the reporter, states

There are traces of new tensions in the green Hill Tracts of Chittagong (CHT). A terrorist group from Myanmar is conducting its activities here. They have occupied huge extents of government lands and built meditation centers (*bhābnā kendra*) and temples (*kiyangs*). The Myanmar terrorist organization 969 conducts their terrorist activities in these meditation centers...

The members of 969 conduct their terrorist activities not only in Myanmar but also in many other places, including the Buddhist populated regions of Bangladesh. They train Buddhist monks (*sanyāsins*) to use guns. Their main targets are Muslims. Every month, fifteen to twenty monks (*sanyāsins*) cross the unprotected borderland of Thanchi and Mizoram to get training in Myanmar. Young men of CHT go to Myanmar and get their training under 969. The extremist monks (*sanyāsins*) from CHT met Asin Wirathu and they have been getting training for using arms from the Buddhist monks in Myanmar (Manna, 2017, my translation from the Bengali).

This article goes on to claim that Buddhist terrorist organizations in Myanmar are inspired by the Buddha, who was “the biggest terrorist” (*santrāsī*). It is full of accusations that incite communal hatred. Since its publication, it has been strongly criticized not only by Buddhists but also by secular intellectuals and even journalists who worked at the same newspaper, for irresponsible journalism, for not having used reliable sources, and, for making disparaging remarks and false accusations against the Buddha and Bangladeshi Buddhists (Bari 2017; Sunandapriya 2013b). Manna mentions Wikipedia as his source in referring to the Buddha as a terrorist, but he has not provided any supporting links. Other writers, including the editor of *Janakantha*, also condemned the article for using Wikipedia as a source and pointed out that the Myanmar nationalist organization 969 invokes the nine qualities of the Buddha, six qualities of the dharma, and nine qualities of the sangha (Sunandapriya 2013b). These qualities themselves have nothing to do with terrorism. It remains true, though, that the organizers of 969 do use anti-Muslim rhetoric, particularly tying it to an alleged increase of the Muslim population in Myanmar. Such rhetoric has also been encouraged by the surge of news on terrorist activities attributed to Islamic organizations like ISIS, which has given rise to Islamophobia and anti-Muslim propaganda in the U.S. and European countries (Thein 2017; Naing 2017). Nevertheless, there is no legitimate evidence for any direct connection of Myanmar’s 969 with Bangladeshi Buddhists (Sundapriya 2017).

Following the Manna article, Buddhist monks in Bangladesh have been targeted and harassed in the cities and rural areas (J Barua 2017). For several weeks after the publication of the article, Bangladeshi Buddhists organized demonstrations protesting its false accusations and demanding legal action against Manna for harming Buddhists and causing communal tensions (Sammaditthi 2017; Daily Janakantha 2017). These protests also denounced the ongoing human rights violations in Myanmar. News conferences were organized to clarify the accusations made in Manna’s article. As a result of the news conferences and protest demonstrations by Bangladeshi Buddhists internationally, the main editor of the *Daily Janakantha* published an official apology “for hurting religious

sentiments” by misquoting Wikipedia (Masud 2017). Much to the dissatisfaction of the Buddhists, the official apology neither denounced nor offered any justification for the other allegations against Buddhists in Manna’s article.

As mentioned above, every time there are new incidents against Rohingyas in Myanmar, communal tensions in Bangladesh against Buddhists also proliferate. The most recent outbreak of the Rohingya crisis in August, 2017, was followed by heightened anxiety among Bangladeshi Buddhists (FirstPost 2017; BD News24 2017; The Daily Star 2017; J Barua 2017). The concerns stated in many demonstrations and news conferences by Bangladeshi Buddhists on the outbreak of this crisis were succinctly expressed on the Facebook page of *Sougata*, a prominent Bengali magazine on contemporary Buddhist issues:

The Buddhists in this country (Bangladesh) are living in terror due to the Rohingya issue in Myanmar. This terror is spread through the explicit threats targeted against Buddhists in social media, communally sensitive talk shows on television channels, and editorials, columns, and reports in the newspapers. It is essential to strengthen the security of all the monasteries. Please tell us how are the innocent Bangladeshi Buddhists responsible for the Rohingya issue in Myanmar? Why is this anger and violence targeted on the innocent people of one’s own country because of some problems in another country? Why spread this communally poisonous vapor? This is my question to the respectable and conscientious people. (Sougata Facebook page, August 31, 2017, my translation from the Bengali)

The threats mentioned in this post did result in actual violence in several places in Bangladesh. Social media, particularly Facebook, have played a major role in spreading messages with hateful content against Buddhists. The targets have generally been Buddhist monks, who are easily identifiable because of their robes. As news of people attacking monks due to the Rohingya issue in Myanmar proliferated, it became increasingly risky for Buddhist monks to travel alone in any part of Bangladesh (Daily Mail 2017). Some of the major Buddhist monasteries in the main urban areas were provided with police protection, but the movement of monks was not safe.

Bangladeshi Buddhists constantly have to defend themselves by denying any connection to the persecution of Rohingyas. They also seek government and police protection, and connect with other minority groups in order to safeguard and uphold religious minority rights (Dipananda 2017). Senior monks and lay leaders from different associations have also organized solidarity processions for Rohingyas and have officially visited the Myanmar embassy, denouncing the violence and urging an immediate solution to the crisis (The Daily Star 2017). Some of the major Buddhist organizations in Bangladesh and abroad have also organized humanitarian aid to support the Rohingya refugees (Dipananda 2017). In addition to these actions, they have, in their communications, highlighted important aspects of their identity as citizens of Bangladesh. For instance, they have found it important to emphasize the participation of Bangladeshi Buddhists during the war for Bangladeshi liberation, thus asserting their patriotism and legitimate rights in the country.

Since they have to constantly defend themselves against allegations of the persecution of Rohingyas in which they have no involvement, Bangladeshi Buddhists also express frustration with the Buddhists of Myanmar (The Daily Star 2017). This frustration was expressed in a widely circulated post from the Facebook Page of *Sougata*,

Myanmar is not a Buddhist country by any means, because their state machinery is not directed by the teachings or principles of the Buddha whatsoever. The majority of the people in this country are identified as Buddhists by birth. This might be the reason for calling Myanmar a Buddhist country. (Sougata Facebook page, August 28, 2017, my translation from the Bengali)

This post also stresses that the Rohingya issue in Myanmar is between Rohingyas and the Myanmar government and military. It invites people not to associate Buddhism in general with this issue and states, “We do not say this to support any oppression against the Rohingyas but to clarify a few points. We do not want any such oppression in Myanmar or anywhere else in the world. We want a peaceful and harmonious world.”

Considering that Bangladeshi Buddhists have historically regarded Myanmar as an ideal Buddhist country (*paṭirūpa des*), and that the modern Theravāda reformation in Bangladesh was led by an Arakanese monk, this claim that Myanmar is not a Buddhist country is striking. It expresses specifically Buddhist disappointment at Myanmar’s failure to safeguard the human rights of the Rohingyas. As Bangladeshi Buddhists denounce violent forms of Buddhism in Myanmar, they also, understandably, portray an image of Buddhism that is peaceful and in favor of communal harmony. Invoking texts like the *Karaṇīya Metta Sutta*, they claim that the core value of Buddhism is the happiness and wellbeing of all living beings (*sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā*). They disclaim violent forms of Buddhism as something that a “true Buddhist” would never resort to.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that, since the beginning of the reformation in the 19th century, the strategy employed by Bangladeshi Buddhists to define their identity and practices involved *connecting with* traditional Buddhist countries. In this strategy, older practices and religious figures shared with Hindus have been gradually replaced by more Theravāda orientated practices and figures. Since this reformation, transnational connections with Buddhist countries have generally involved seeking models for religious/ritualistic texts, practices, and education. This was not an uncritical imitation of a foreign culture or literature. Instead, Bangladeshi Buddhist leaders adapted these practices and texts into pre-existing Bengali literary genres and into the geographical and cultural conditions of Bangladesh.

I have also pointed out that Bangladeshi Buddhists currently face two challenges in retaining their Theravāda Buddhist identity. First is the introduction of a new form of Buddhism, Japanese Risshō-Kōsei-kai. RKK is being established in Bangladesh with its distinct features of lay leadership, Mahayana texts, and a focus on Japanese language and culture. RKK claims to maintain a “cordial relationship” with the existing Theravāda tradition. Their practices, however, being distinct from

those of Theravāda, pose a major challenge to the homogeneity of the Bangladeshi Buddhist community. This is complicated by the fact that Japan is a major donor nation to the Bangladesh government. Although RKK's presence may be disruptive to Theravāda institutions, its Japanese connection is important in safeguarding Bangladeshi Buddhists. The second challenge I have pointed out concerns the rise of Buddhist extremism and the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar. Media portrayal of the Rohingya crisis as an act of Buddhist extremism provokes Islamic extremism in Bangladesh, in turn posing a threat to the survival of Buddhists in the country. This situation requires Bangladeshi Buddhists to downplay their indebtedness to Myanmar for 19th century monastic reforms. Instead, Bangladeshi Buddhists have understandably begun to ideologically distance themselves from violent Buddhist movements, in favor of projecting an image of Buddhism as peaceful and as allowing the harmonious co-existence of diverse communities. As a religious minority, with experience of persecution, Bangladeshi Buddhists seem to feel a genuine empathy and concern for the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar.

Thus, the transnational connections are important for Bangladeshi Buddhists' reflection on and reformation of their own practices by following majority Buddhist countries. These transnational connections also have direct consequences on the survival of the Bangladeshi Buddhist community. Bangladeshi government may use them to strengthen diplomatic ties or Muslim extremists may use them to express their rage in response to harassment of Muslims elsewhere.

Allegiance to ostensibly religious traditions, lineages, and countries turns out to be not always purely religious in nature. Sāramedha's reforms generated an interest among Bangladeshis in connecting with an "original" and "pure" form of Buddhism, authenticated by Theravāda Vinaya. This religious interest also made it convenient to connect culturally and politically with neighboring Theravāda countries. Similarly, if RKK had approached Bangladesh with only the Heart Sūtra or the Lotus Sūtra, perhaps they would not have been as successful as they have. RKK's religious success in Bangladesh seems very much due to their involvement in secular activities and humanitarian works. Bangladeshi Buddhists are left with the option to embrace RKK's influences as opportunities to expand their knowledge of Buddhism or to consider RKK as a well-wishing friend and accept their humanitarian activities without allowing them to make a permanent change in the religious landscape of Bangladesh.

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